Simon Navagathegama

THE ADDICT

Translated by Ranjini Obeyesekere

Evening is ending. Cortal[1] David has a lot of work. Peasants, their bodies damp with their day's labor, crowd onto his porch in an endless flow. Bottles of *kassippu*[2] lie hidden among the bushes of his overgrown yard. From time to time he brings one out from among the bushes. The liquor, swilled from dirt-stained glasses, seeps into the bodies of his clients, searing their throats and stomachs. The one or two rupees knotted in the corner of their loincloths fall into Cortal David's lap. Some, wiping their mouths and slowly stroking their empty bellies, finger their now-unknotted kerchief as they step outide and onto the road. Others circle around waiting for the liquor to take its effect, savoring it on their tongues. There is the confusion of the marketplace there.

Sadana, sipping his half-bottle since the early evening, lies sprawled in a corner of Cortal David's yard. Unlike the others, he does not drink from a glass. As usual, David has filled his regular half-bottle for him. He takes it in his hand, hugs it close, and sips it slowly. Gradually the tiredness subsides. He feels the kassippu permeate his whole body. He likes to lie there contemplating how the veins in his body slowly become intoxicated. After the current reaches a certain point of intensity, he gets up from his sprawling position. His lips come to life. There is so much to talk about with those who come here. His shaky legs now pace back and forth over Cortal David's yard until night falls. His limbs move, entangling themselves in the feet of some, banging against others, and are flung this way and that. Cortal David treats Sadana better than he does anyone else. His half-bottle is always of the best matured stuff. It is, in addition, thickened with a few grams of opium. For over four years now he has been addicted to this drink.

Till he was forty years old he lived alone, free as a bird in the blue sky. At forty he acquired a good wife. For eight years he lived a happily married life. Apart from the mild drinking habit acquired in his bachelor days and the regret that they were childless, there was little to mar their happiness. Then one day his wife fell victim to a dangerous disease. He spent all he had on her. He mortgaged the only piece of land he owned to Cortal David in order to treat her illness. Had she recovered, by now everything would have turned out well. Instead, she became an incurable invalid. A great change then came over him too.

The one-eighth glass of kassippu, which was his daily, drink now increased to a half-bottle. For two or three days at a time he worked for half a day as a hired laborer. It was all that was needed to sustain his now-unwanted existence.

His wife, a wasted rag, groaned and moaned, wheezing inside the house. She came alive only at sundown. From then on there was no escape for him. Like a raging demoness, she would turn on him, shouting abuse all night long as if taking revenge for some old grudge. She would grind her teeth and cling to him, and her shouts and abuse would ring out into the night. All the same, she would cook whatever he brought home, serve it, and push the plate towards him. Only when eating did Sadana show any sign of life. For the rest, as if to avoid his wife's constant rage, he lazily preserved his state of drunken

stupor. He was accustomed to living by merely raising or lowering his level of intoxication to match his wife's anger.

During this long period of change, Cortal David treated him as a good friend. Sadana's house and garden now belonged to him. It was three years and five months since the mortgage had expired, but he said nothing about it to Sadana. He made no claim to the land. From the day he became owner of the property, however, he stopped charging Sadana for the half-bottle of kassippu. That was the only difference. Nor did Sadana ever bother to inquire either from Cortal David or himself, "Have my house and land become Cortal David's property now? Why have I been drinking kassippu at no charge these past three-and-a-half years?" Instead he lived as one who had consciously chosen to forget everything regarding his life. There was nothing he would not talk about when drunk, yet he said not a word about himself, not even when drunk.

"Ha . . . Rano . . . ," he now exclaims, dragging himself towards a companion who was emptying a cup of kassippu in the yard. "Why is it you pucker your face and hang your head dejectedly these days? Is something the matter?"

"Yes, old man," Rano replies, tilting his head back to pour the last few drops into his mouth. "Two of my girls are very sick, man. Besides, the wife is now in her ninth month. I don't know what to do. When I go home I don't get a moment's sleep. The wife, with her hand supporting her back, goes out and gathers herbs all day, and then all night long I have to crush them and brew concoctions for them."

"Why, man, with so much to do, how it is you hang around here drinking kassippu? Who's the doctor treating them? What's the nature of their illness?" Rana enters upon a detailed account of the illness.

"Yes, yes, that's a terrible disease. If you don't treat it immediately, those two lovely girls will be lost." Sadana listens to Rana's tale of woe and advises him.

"Go to Galigamuwa. Get them some medicine from the Gampaha doctor and see what happens. He's a good doctor. If he once takes them on, there's nothing more you need worry about." Sadana then spits out on all sides of the yard, and the spittle hits the feet of anyone who happens to be passing by.

"You better take some serious interest in caring for those little ones. It's no joking matter. Drinking Cortal and hanging around here won't help you. You're a family man. Looking after a family is not easy like drinking Cortal." Rambling on in this manner Sadana finally takes his empty bottle and hands it to David.

David has no time to stand talking to him. He has to keep his ears peeled to distinguish whether the sound in the distance is the bus from Abogama or the police jeep. Besides, he has to pour out drinks for those still clambering onto his porch, give them their individual portions of diluted or strengthened kassippu and collect the money from each one. He has to keep a mental note of the accounts of all these people. Every single empty bottle has to be hidden in the bushes--hidden so that even the blows of the policeman's iron pick would not uncover them. Fresh bottles have to be got out from their hiding places. In spite of all this work, however, he does not fail to exchange a word or two with Sadana.

"How's your drink?"

"Just right. Excellent." Sadana shows his teeth in a grin.

"He . . . he . . . he . . . he. . . ," David replies with a similar laugh.

"Is there too much opium?" he asks.

"No . . . no . . . it's the usual amount, eh? He . . . he . . . he . . ."

"Eh . . . he . . . he . . . he . . . ."

David never spoke to him about anything other than the kassippu. Sadana too talked of nothing else. This limited exchange indicated to both that strong bond of friendship and understanding that existed between them. The fact that both of them could laugh the same laugh was proof of it.

Night falls. It is time for Sadana to go home. A shudder runs through him. As if to push the thought away he stretches himself, runs his fingers through his matted hair, pulls it forward over his forehead and eyes. He then sets out on his way home.

The path is indistinct in the dark. But though he does not see it, he does not lose his way. How strange it would be if he did lose his way and arrived at some other place. Whatever that would mean to his stomach, what a relief it would be to his eyes and ears. His wife, who crouched all day on the tattered mat like a bundle of dirty rags, came alive at evening and would now be on the lookout for him. Moisture was bad for her wheeze, so she never bathed, never washed her face. She was not a human being. With dishevelled hair, eyes like flaming coals, red with pain and rage, she rose like a demoness before his mind's eye. He shuddered again. If only he could miss the road and arrive somewhere else. But even in the most bitter blackness, just as the hand inevitably takes a lump of rice straight to the mouth, his legs would take him to his own broken-down hut.

His house and yard were a hellhole. A demoness resided there. His wife was no longer the good and kind woman he had once known. She had been ill now for a long time. At some time during that illness the good woman he had known had died. This was not she. It was a demon arisen on her death. There are different kinds of demons and spirits, many of them weak. This one was complete with all the powers of the most terrible demons. Although for the past five years he had gone to his house each evening--that graveyard she presided over--he had still not learned to coexist with her there. He would never get used to it.

Each evening as he turned into his yard--today just the same as five years ago--a shudder passed through him. Each morning he left the house with an overwhelming sense of relief. Even on days he was not working, he never came back home before nightfall.

His wife would lie all day in a corner moaning and writhing in pain. She never appealed to the gods or cried out her pain. There was no relief for her. She would hoard all her aches and pains and the pressures that wracked her mind. But with the cool of evening, as if by divine dispensation, the aches and pains vanished. Then, apart from the wheezing, her other ailments disappeared.

At the very hour when Sadana's veins were revitalized by the half-bottle of kassippu, her limbs too came alive. She would get up laboriously and light the fire. Then she would crane her neck and look out for her husband's return. He did not come before dark. With the burning fire in the hearth her anger too would flare, rise, and engulf her. She would clear her throat, blow her

nose, and prepare her voice and tongue for the attack. It mattered little whether there was provocation for her anger or not. She became enraged without cause. Her mind was fixed in the quite unfair conviction that this hell she had fallen into was Sadana's creation. She knew that each evening her husband liked his water hot. So she filled a pot and put it on the fire. Then she cooked whatever he had brought the previous day. But even as the water in the pot began to boil, dance, and hiss, the anger within her would seethe and overflow, bringing words of harsh abuse to her lips. Sadana heard it even after he fell asleep. If she sensed that he was no longer listening, she would throw a broom or some other object at him.

"Uuh . . . woman . . . I wonder that my back is not broken. . . ," was all he would say. A dry cough, combined intermittently with the wheezing, accompanied her loud-voiced anger, which rose in shrill, rank abuse shattering his ears, resounded in the far corners of the village, and slowly subsided.

All this, as if according to a divinely ordained timetable, had been a daily occurrence throughout the past five years. He had not yet grown accustomed to any of it.

To delay his arrival at home he walked very slowly. As he drew nearer to the house, the demon form of his wife standing at the door and glaring like a rabid bitch at his approach would become distinct and appear even more frightening. He would then struggle to increase the stupor that enveloped him in order to fortify his faltering mind. The half-bottle of "special" and whatever amount of opium there had been in it would now seem nothing to him. One could not look a demoness in the face unless one's own level of intoxication was more than whatever one had consumed. Even the great warrior Gotaimbara went to face the great graveyard demon Mahasona only after having consumed sixteen casks of liquor. Like all seasoned drinkers, Sadana could raise and lower the level of his intoxication at will. On sight of her he would raise his drunkenness to the point where he could hardly stand straight.

"So you have come, have you, drunk and after darkness has fallen. You have come home, have you?" His wife would greet him in a voice that made his teeth chatter as it mingled with the grating sound of her asthmatic wheeze.

"Have you come now, stoned, drunk as a fish?"

His mind would struggle to run and hide in some deserted corner where it would not have to listen to her terrifying and deadly lamentation. With great effort he would prepare himself and enter the doorway of his home.

The yard was full of tall, overgrown bushes. One or two broken *endaru* sticks lying around was all that remained of what had once been a fence. He shut his ears and eyes, wrapped himself in his drunkenness, and prepared to enter the house.

The next minute he looked in astonishment at the house. There was not a hint of light inside. It was pitch black, not a glimmer. For a moment he stood still, then walked slowly through the yard. He stood outside and tried to peer into the nooks and crannies of the dilapidated house shrouded in darkness. He could see nothing. As the earth, bathed all day by the heat of the fierce sun, finally emits a faint sigh of relief as it mingles with the cool of darkness, so a feeble moan coming from a corner of the house fell on his ears. A vague, lonely fear arose in him.

"Hey . . ." The sound of his own voice amazed him. For more than five years now--certainly not less--he had not spoken to his wife on entering the house. His drunkenness instantly vanished he knew not where. His foot

knocked against the edge of the porch as he climbed up on it. The moan came from within the house. He ran here and there confusedly. What should he do? Nothing was happening today as on previous evenings. The usual routine had been altered. He looked here and there as if trying to decide what to do.

"Hey! Do you hear me?" The words slipped from him. It was how he used to call out to her five years ago. But her moaning merely increased.

He moved towards the kitchen and felt around where he thought the fireplace was. His hand struck a piece of firewood buried under the ashes. He picked it up, blew on it once or twice, and saw it spark. After struggling for a long time he managed to get the fire going. Then he found the bottle-lamp, lit it, and with the lamp in hand walked quickly into the room. He barely managed to stop himself from tripping over the threshold and falling. He was not drunk. He walked towards his moaning wife. He held the lamp high up and gazed at her from head to foot as if blind and unable to see.

"What's the matter?" he asked in a trembling voice. "What is it?" She was breathing fast. Her withered upper body was naked. She clung to her breasts with her ten sticks of fingers. With each inhalation her ribs and chest bones stood out, the veins etched against them so you could see the skeleton through her partially dissolved flesh.

"I'm very sick. . . ," she muttered with parched lips. A dry rasping breath as from a bellows escaped from her nostrils and mouth. There was not an ounce of flesh on her face. The mop of her hair, tangled and dishevelled like a mad woman's, covered her forehead. His hand instinctively went towards it. Squatting, holding the lamp in one hand, he stroked her hair back with the other.

"Shall I give you some water?" His trembling voice was full of grief. The kassippu he had drunk a moment ago now came churning up in his throat. He was aware of it but not as before. There was no intoxication in it. It seemed nothing more than a gulp of water rising up in his throat.

He took the lamp, went to the kitchen, and brought a little water. He then poured a drop on her lips. He took a pillow filled with ricehusks lying nearby, lifted her gently, placed it beneath her head, and sat beside her, his eyes staring into hers. For a long time they were both silent. After his attentions, her face slowly underwent a change. Twisted with pain as it was, a certain peace came over it. Her lips, which were a concentration of her grief and pain, now took on a faint shadow of joy. Sadana saw that certain pleasing traits that in the past five years had vanished from her face now appeared there again behind the harsh lines. She was wasted with sickness and age. But as he looked at her he saw a glimmer of a shadow of the loving wife he had known five years ago.

She seemed somewhat relieved after drinking the water. The rising and falling of her breath slowed down. Her hand rose to touch his, which was resting on his knee. The tears that came to her eyes seemed like dewdrops touched by the sun and danced in the light of the lamp.

"You must be very tired after digging the earth all day," she stammered.

"No . . . I. . . ," he tried to say something. There was nothing to say. Even if there had been, he could not have, his throat was so choked with grief.

"Put some water on the fire--there's a little tea left in that tin--pour

yourself some tea. In a little when I can hold my head up, I'll make you a *roti*.[3]

"No--it's not necessary."

Again for a long while there was nothing said between then. She continued only to look into his eyes. There was not a sound or movement around them. Apart from the breath escaping through her lips, even the air outside seemed still. The lamp gave out a dim light, and the wick burned perfectly straight.

"The past several years have been a bad time for us."

"Yes," he said, staring at the hollows and clefts of her face as they changed with the shadows. He had now quite forgotten that he had drunk any kassippu that evening.

"An astrologically bad period was on us."

"Yes . . ."

"It's our karma that was the cause of it all. The results of our deeds follow us like shadows."

They talked, not using the words "I" or "my" but "we" and "our." The rift that had existed between them for five years now closed in a moment. An understanding deeper than had ever been was slowly growing, giving rise to hopes of a new future. But for her illness, they would at this moment have been the happiest couple alive.

She still held his hand and stayed a long while not saying anything more. Perhaps because of the absence of the former unmitigated barrage of sound that used to hurt his ears, he seemed to sense a certain emptiness, as of ghosts standing around him. The understanding that had arisen between them was so strong, however, that he sensed the emptiness only vaguely. This understanding seemed to both of them to grow as strong in their moments of long silence as when they exchanged a word or two.

Aroused by a vague feeling of grief that seemed to combine with the silence, he tried to clothe the skeleton lying before him with the flesh and blood and former vitality of the woman he had known.

With difficulty she turned her head, and sustaining herself with groans she looked around her. The soot-blackened walls, the dilapidated roof draped in cobwebs with the hanging strands of eye-flies, met her gaze. A lump of straw hung down between two beams. One part of the wall, washed out by the rain dripping from the roof, was devoid of all its wattle and mud covering.

"Alas, our house is all dilapidated . . . hm . . . hm . . . hm . . . do you remember we talked about it before I fell ill. How we would enlarge the old house and renovate it. Remember, we decided to raise the front roof, put another row of rafters and some posts and widen the verandah. Then there'll be plenty of room in front. Any visitors could sit comfortably and even eat there. In the event of a feast for a work-gang, ten or fifteen could comfortably eat at one sitting."

"Yes," Sandana agreed. Surprisingly he forgot that both his house and the land had, a long while ago, been mortgaged and now belonged to Cortal David. His wife, however, did not know about the mortgage so she could talk without reservation about renovating the house, enlarging it, and adding on to it.

How was it that Sadana could so readily confirm her suggestions and so unqualifiedly agree to them?

"We can do it even now. That's not such a big job, is it? Once we cut a few well-seasoned *andara* saplings as timber for the rafters, it's done. After that it's merely a matter of cutting a few *dummala* sticks for the roof and then thatching it with straw."

"If we were to go to a threshing floor, we could tie up a hundred or so bundles. Once we thatch the entire roof this leak here will stop. All we need do first is to cut some *kuratiya* sticks and some andara saplings," she replied.

He, too, as if to follow her suggestions, cast his eyes around the house. He discussed her ideas, disagreed with some of them.

"No, no. Kuratiya sticks are no good for rafters. We can chop some *wira* saplings. Even for the posts *tharana* is better than dummala. Tharana doesn't decay. It lasts a hundred years. We might as well do a job that will last--while we are about it. I'm thinking we'll not just do the front roof but extend the roof all round the house and add porches. Then we'll have the room in the center with a verandah all around. Wouldn't that be grand? It will look like Heena's house. Then you'll have plenty of space on the verandah to pound, winnow, work, or just to walk around."

In this manner, for the better part of the night, the two of them, hand in hand, talked of renovating their house. At last he began to feel sleepy. Without bothering to close the door he stretched himself out beside her.

Stopping from time to time to take a breath between wheezes, she continued to talk. While her husband worked on the timber she would get the red mud for replastering the walls and the floor of the porches. She described at great length how she would do this to perfection, without a flaw.

She stopped her talk only when she heard her husband snoring in his sleep. Releasing her fingers from his grasp with difficulty, she tugged at a piece of rag lying close by, covered her chest and neck with it. For a long time she did not fall asleep. Remembering the distant past, she wept tears of joy. She felt the pain in her chest increase but never once thought to wake her husband. The flame, drawing up the last drop of oil in the bottom of the lamp, flared up from time to time and was burning out. Twice or thrice she twisted around with difficulty and coughed. For a long while she panted. In the light of the dying flame she continued to gaze at the darkening face of her husband.

"The blessings of the Triple Gem protect you. . . ," she murmured, "the blessings of the Triple Gem. . . ."[4]

Sleep completely overpowered Sadana's wearied limbs where he lay stretched. Because of the dramatic change that had taken place that evening, after five years, he did not feel the intoxication of the kassippu. But when he lay lifeless in sleep, the opium together with the kassippu running through his veins began to exert their power. Crazed by the potion he had drunk, his mind worked all night long, cutting timber for the house. He extended the roof around the house, added the porches exactly as he and his wife had decided. His wife stood by him helping.

Waking in the morning he lay as he was, thinking, as if trying to clarify something. He was sleeping on his back looking up. In the distance cows were lowing. The door was still open as it had been all night. Bands of morning

sunshine came in at the door. His wife slept in the midst of a bundle of rags, stiff as a log. The customary wheeze no longer came from her. Her hand, which had fallen on his body, was cold as ice. Still in his sleepy state he tried to lift it and lay it aside but he could not move it. It was stiff as if cut in wood. He sat up instantly and peered into her face. Her eyes were closed. Apart from the jaw bones and the bones of the forehead in her immobile face, the rest was sunken. In the corner of her nostrils were drops of liquid, like beads of sweat.

For a long time, as if unable to gain control of his mind, he gazed at her.

"What have you done to yourself?" he muttered like one not quite in his right mind. Then taking up the rags lying in a corner, he covered the skeleton that was now visible in her face. A sound like a sob escaped his lips. He did not cry. Like one who had made a firm resolve, he stood up quickly. He tightened his waist-cloth, slung his other sarong round his neck, took the handkerchief lying near by, pushed back the gray locks falling all over his forehead, and tied it around his head. The handkerchief, perhaps because of being constantly dampened by sweat and water, was crumpled.

He closed the door carefully and stepped out.

"I will make it all. I will renovate the house just as she said. . . ," he muttered to himself, not even bothering to glance at the roof he was planning to extend. He stepped out onto the road.

Sadana went straight to Cortal David's house. David had just awakened. He was cleaning out some bottles with sand. Sadana always came to meet him in the evening. Today he had changed his customary habit. David looked at him with interest. He could glean nothing from Sadana's withered face covered with sweat and care. There was a certain determination in his eyes, however, that David had not seen before.

"I want your axe and knife."

Cortal David looked in surprise at Sadana's face. Sadana's manner of speech was also different.

"I'm going to the jungle to cut timber for renovating the house. I want your axe and knife. I'll return them in the evening."

"To renovate the house?"

"Yes, the house. I plan to extend the roof all around and make a porch on all sides."

David thought a moment. Then he went silently into the house and brought out an axe and a grass-cutting knife.

"You'll have to sharpen that knife on some sand; it's a little blunt."

"I want a quarter bottle of kassippu too today."

David gazed at Sadana's face again for a moment as if trying to understand what was written on that face.

"If you have even an eighth left, it's enough."

David walked down the yard, dragged out a bottle from under a bush, and

poured a quarter bottle into Sadana's half-bottle. He then gave it to him. Sadana put the bottle to his lips and poured the contents down into his empty stomach. David watched in amazement as the kassippu went down in two gulps.

Sadana returned the bottle to David and, shouldering the axe and knife, turned to go. He took a few steps, stopped, and looked into David's face.

"My woman died last night." A blazing fire was burning in Sadana's eyes.

David could muster up no words. He stood staring while Sadana quickly stepped over the stile onto the road and disappeared from sight.

Though he had drunk the kassippu in two mouthfuls, Sadana did not even clear his throat or spit.

It was quite dark when he returned. All day he had worked. He had dug up some *gonawela* roots, eaten the yams, drunk some water, and so had been able to work without feeling hunger. When he stepped into David's house, the last of the customers for kassippu had already left. He placed the axe and knife against a corner of the porch. The stream of sweat that all afternoon had poured down his ears and coagulated on his body made him stink so strongly that one could barely pass by him.

David was not at home. His unprepossessing wife came out.

"Alas! It is brother Sadana, is it not? Where in the world have you been loitering? You won't be able to even lay a hand on the corpse. Heavens! What kind of a man are you? With a funeral in your house, is this how you go about making funeral arrangements? Oh, you fellows! All you want is to smear a little kassippu on your lips. Alas, I don't know what has come over the gods that rule the world! Yes, I suppose this is how things get done in the *kali* era.[5] Where the devil were you, man? Loitering around with your axe and knife? The menfolk were planning to set off in the morning to comb the forest to find out where you had hung yourself."

"I went to the forest to work--to cut rafters."

"Enough . . . enough of this talk about your own affairs. Go home now--even though it's late. I doubt whether you'll be in time even to throw a handful of earth on the grave. My children's father[6] has been gone since morning. The headman said they were to bury the body whether you were there or not--that if a question arose, he would answer for it. The father of my girls, together with a few other men, made all the arrangements and waited until late this evening hoping you would turn up. Since you didn't come, they've gone now to bury her. Alas! Alas! Although it was her karma to be an invalid, yet before she fell ill she was a woman who lived on good terms with everybody. It was your drunkenness that caused her death. Otherwise, she was not a woman to have died like that. My children's father said they could not keep the corpse for even one night. It must have been half decayed even at the moment of death. Go now. Go at least to the graveside if you can do nothing else."

Sadana, tying, untying, and now knotting the handkerchief round his head, walked with heavy steps restlessly round the yard. He spoke as soon as David's wife finished her sermon.

"Pour out a half for me."

"Can you not do without your drink at least today?"

Continuing to scold him she poured out a half bottle of kassippu for him. He finished it in four mouthfuls and stepped down. Then he climbed back on to the porch and approached David's wife. Before she realized it he had snatched the bottle in her hand and drunk the rest of it.

"Thu!" she spat at him. "What kind of man are you?" She began to abuse him. "It's a good thing for you it is us you have to deal with! For five years you've drunk kassippu free of charge. Did you pay a penny for it? Your broken-down house and yard came to us--anybody else would have thrown you out. Do you see? It was because of my children's father that your woman could at least die in her own house. We didn't lay claim to the land, not because of any consideration for you. It was because of that invalid woman. If we had thrown you out according to the law, that woman would long since have died in a ditch."

A lamp was burning inside the house. Sadana, having drunk a full bottle of kassippu, came staggering in and sat on a corner of the porch. David stood a long time staring into the yard.

"We buried the body," he said at last. "I didn't like to bury her while you were away--but the headman sent some men--instructed us to wait till evening for you, and if you did not come, to bury her. We are all grieved at her death. The women of the village brought pieces of white cloth and wrapped the body in them."

Sadana hiccupped with the kassippu now rising to his head. His cheeks puffed up as if blowing a conch and expelled a gust of air.

"This stuff's very strong, man. Looks as if quite a lot of grams of opium had fallen into it."

"I thought you'd blame me for burying the body without you," David said in a genuinely sad voice. He was sincerely sorry and very grieved at the total collapse of Sadana's family.

"I . . . do you know . . . do you know, friend . . . I came here today having completed all the work," said Sadana, flinging his hands and feet about. "I cut rafters out of good wira saplings. For the sticks I cut all tharana wood. It will last a hundred years. Yes, I will renovate the whole house, just as we discussed it last night. I will get straw and thatch the roof. She will then dig up the brown mud to daub the walls. Then everybody will see our house too as a home. Understand?"

David looked with sorrow at Sadana talking drunkenly.

"I'm deeply sorry, man--to see you fallen to this low level--that you are so lost," he said. He looked around as if he could not say what he had intended to say. The half moon that had risen in the sky was blotted out by a cloud and the darkness deepened.

"I'm very sorry, man--but there is nothing more I can do. Yes, nothing I can do. I did all I could. You know well that it's now four-and-a-half years since you mortgaged the house and land and took the money. It was mortgaged for one year only. It has been mine now for over three-and-a-half years. But I didn't say a word about it. That old house is of no use to me--but the land is valuable. You mortgaged it to me for seventy-five rupees--but the land is worth much more. That is why I have given you free drinks all these months. If I add up all you've drunk daily--it would amount to over a thousand rupees. But I decided to let it go towards the value of the land. Do you understand, man? Besides, your wife could hardly stand up, lying at death's

door these many months; so even though the land was mine, I didn't want to throw that sick woman out of her house. That's why I didn't mention till today that all this belonged to me. I know one shouldn't talk about such matters on a day like this. But since you keep talking about renovating the house, I thought I'd better mention it. Besides, whether we say it today or later, we must, after all, straighten out these matters. We're also poor people. I'm thinking of clearing this land and planting some coconut trees. You can do some hired work and come and sleep in our house at night. I'm hoping to enlarge the house a little and perhaps to rent it to the scavenger-coolies who come to work at the hospital. I could get at least ten rupees a month. You understand, don't you? I'm thinking of enlarging the house a little, thatching it with coconut leaves and renting it."

"No, no, you don't have to use coconut leaves, man." Sadana, as if he had listened carefully to David's talk, began again to blabber drunkenly. He continued talking rapidly as if vomiting out his bellyful of kassippu.

"No, no. You don't have to use coconut leaves. My wife and I are intending to enlarge and renovate the house. We'll raise the roof all round, lengthen the rafters, and add a porch on all sides. There'll be a porch right round the house, and the room will be in the middle. Then, whether it be a wedding or a work-feast, ten or fifteen people could sit round at one time and eat. That was my woman's idea. All last night we talked about it and decided on it. Ugh! Ugh! My throat, man! It's amazingly strong, this damned kassippu today. But she won't like renting the house. Then where would she sleep when her condition got bad? Besides, she would certainly not agree to coconut thatch instead of straw. She's a woman who does everything methodically and economically. Why spend unnecessarily on coconut leaves? Straw's good enough. No need for unncesssary expenditure on damned coconut thatch. Once I extend the house, add the porch and thatch the roof with straw, she'll mix the brown mud, plaster the walls, redo the floors with dung[7] and do up the place nicely. Then our house too will be a fine house, friend! Then we too will have good times. Isn't that right what I'm saying, friend? We too will have good times!"

Thus Sadana, as if trying to suppress in his mind the reality that David was trying to bring up, continued to talk on and on. He vomited forth a torrent of words that seemed, together with the kassippu, to rise churning up in his throat.

NOTES

1. The brand name of a kind of aspirin or pep pill--used also in brewing illicit liquor. Here used as a nickname.

2. An illicit brew.

3. A flat, unleavened bread.

4. The Buddhist form of blessing.

5. According to Indian belief the *kali yuga* (black age) was the era of evil that marked the coming of the end of the world. It was characterized by a total reversal of all traditional values.

6. A husband or wife never refer to each other or call each other directly by name in a traditional peasant household.

7. Rural homes in Sri Lanka have floors covered with a smooth paste made of mud and cow dung.